Literary Journeys

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Mine is one of those families that likes to spend the weekend daylight hours nosing round a castle, a country park, a nature reserve or a museum. We are members of more than one heritage organisation, more than one conservation charity. We happily display their stickers in the rear window of our car.

Though the need to get the children out of the house plays its part, I don't remember a time when I didn't enjoy visiting these places. The interest developed new dimensions when I worked, for nine too-brief months, as a costumed interpreter at Hampton Court Palace back in the 1990s, but its roots lay in the weekend preferences of my own parents: not only country houses, or the lawned expanses of monuments with their terse Ministry of Works labels, but the less manicured pleasures of innumerable village churches, trackless ballast and brambles on overgrown branch lines, the memorable oddity of Temple Bar plonked down in a Hertfordshire wood. These sites of memory seemed denser, somehow, than elsewhere. Philip Larkin once described those who visit places in this mood (himself included, it ought to be said) as 'ruin-bibbers', 'randy for antique', but it has never felt to me simply like consumption or gratification, even when done casually or half in jest.

What's more, I find the imaginative engagement provoked by such sites intertwines with long-pondered responses to literature. This isn't just a matter of literary tourism, rewarding though that can be. I've visited my fair share of birthplaces and graves, looked over preserved desks with their still-expectant writing materials, sought out the prospect in which a well-loved writer found sustenance. It's a noble and ancient pastime: in 1343, Petrarch visited the landscapes and places that had inspired Virgil, and his own house at Arquà has a venerable pedigree as a tourist

destination. But the desire to enter the author's study, or to see the landscapes evoked in his or her writing, is in some ways an expression of a melancholy dissatisfaction with the literary works as well as an acknowledgement of their power. It regrets the fact that the books come to an end, and seeks to refresh the imagination of place and moment with the evidence of the senses or a knowledge of their authorial origins. Literature wouldn't be half so potent – and I suspect I wouldn't have a job – if it couldn't move us this way, so I certainly don't want to align myself with any academic condescension towards these responses. Nevertheless, a question seems pertinent: what is it about these books, this *writing*, that the pleasures we take in them can set off such yearnings, and even provoke us into travel?

However else it might reasonably be answered, this is the kind of question routinely posed by literary critics. The fascination with literary language is a sometimes uncomfortable mix of passion and puzzlement, of readerly pleasure and the ingenuous wonder that such a thing should be possible. But while we might agree, mostly, on the impetus of our enquiry, critics have been less clear over the years about the nature of the passion to which literature subjects us. I want to emphasise here the capacity of literary language to highlight the word as 'etymological occurrence,' in Seamus Heaney's evocative phrase, a 'symptom of human history, memory and attachments'. The words we treat as current coin, of course, are not our inventions: we have taken them on, and they all have stories around them. They are in fact dense with histories that can only in certain circumstances come to full attention. And what can be said of the individual word is more starkly true of the phrase, the figure of speech, and of the poem, play or novel they help to compose. All the dimensions of a verbal edifice on which literary criticism focuses its attention – genre, form, syntax, rhythm, diction – are redolent and resonant, especially when functional demands were never or are no longer in view. Although we sometimes prize literature for its relevance to contemporary concerns, this doesn't rule out the experience of recognising in it the peculiar potency of an inheritance – a valuable possession, yes, but also something that we find ourselves taking on as a challenge

or surprise. Both ours and not ours, it affects us in the here and now by virtue of its passage from other times.

Literary tourists might well be expected to acknowledge that the vivid story or imagined world that impelled their journey is the effect of words set out in *this* specific arrangement, on *these* pages. The custodians of such a site will not be unaware of the centrality of words and works to its interpretation. But is this sense of literature's 'etymological occurrence' at all relevant to the presentation and enjoyment of non-literary sites, and what we might imagine is a non-literary heritage? I have more than once seen and felt the pleasure to be had from hearing the origins of such everyday phrases as 'a flash in the pan' or 'to come up to scratch' explained in the course of interpretative work – interpreters, as much as visitors, clearly recognise the affective power of a language recharged with its history. Literature belongs to this history – it is even, as Heaney suggests, symptomatic of it. It can provide a repository of attitudes, facts or information, and a record of the kind of everyday detail about human life in the past that isn't so easily visible in the grand epochal perspective. Literary journeys like those of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson or Robert Louis Stevenson are a fascinating model, complement or shadow for our own itineraries, and their adventures and encounters provide us not just with eyewitness accounts of a place's past but also with insights into how they witnessed it in the fullest sense of that word – and the words they chose, and the tone and style and vocabulary that register their impressions, are what bear that significance. When we hear or read those words, we may feel ourselves get closer to that experience; at the same time, we may also sense – through the same means – more aspects of the difference between their world and ours than we can otherwise appreciate.

But if literary travel narratives are one particular resource, it's also worth emphasising that literature of all kinds can provoke a more full-bodied engagement with the histories around us. An extract or quotation from a literary source somehow worked into a site can furnish the visitor with an allusive, elliptical, indirect but perfectly judged moment of insight into the place's historical freight by virtue of its own. This is a way of working with literary sources that acknowledges their historical

or etymological power *as* literature, just as we recognise that other words inscribed in the landscape – epitaph, inscription or artwork – have, as well as a literal meaning, a form, shape, texture and colour that give them their weight of significance and are integral to the force they can exert upon us. Writers and artists, of course, know this: Ian Hamilton Finlay, for example, insisted not only on the importance of the formal characteristics and capacities of literary language, but also on the vital relation between these features and a word's visual and tactile presentation. And writers who have brooded on the histories that animate their works have imagined their writing as inscribing, and themselves as stonemasons – leaving words for the future, certainly, but also emphasising their long voyage through historical time. As the Northumbrian poet Basil Bunting put it:

Words!
Pens are too light.
Take a chisel to write.

Interpretation that taps into the heft of literary language broadens the spectrum of response, adding significantly to the experience of place for those who are moved by it – and most of us have found ourselves moved by a poem, a speech, a fiction at some point. It seems to me that this is still a repository from which much more can be drawn.